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ABSTRACT

Fifty-five colleges that require graduating students to pass a writing proficiency examination were surveyed as to the form and nature of their examinations and the formal preparation and follow-up procedures offered to students taking the examinations. The examination formats fall into three broad categories: 62% are essay only, 31% are essay plus objective tests, and 2% are standardized, machine scored tests. Half the colleges reported that over 70% of their students pass on the first try. Seventy-five percent of the schools use a holistic scoring technique for evaluating exams. The survey revealed that the recent interest in writing proficiency requirements is creating renewed interest in the writing lab as an important campus resource. Ninety percent of the schools have a writing lab, and approximately 20% of those require students who fail the writing proficiency exam to attend a writing lab or workshop. These data suggest that the writing center/lab should do more than provide basic skill training in writing. Rather, the lab can serve as a resource for the entire faculty, helping them deal more effectively with writing problems in all disciplines by providing (1) writing across the curriculum seminars, (2) faculty training workshops in diagnostic procedures, (3) diagnostic materials and composition exercises supported by research on the relationship between cognitive development and writing ability, and (4) materials and workshops on problems confronting writers at all levels of writing ability. (HTH)

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Writing Proficiency Examinations:

A New Perspective on Writing Labs

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Within the last few years many colleges and universities have become concerned about a perceptible and widely publicized decline in the writing ability of their students. In response some schools have made an effort to promote more writing in all academic disciplines through "writing across the curriculum" programs. Others have mandated college-wide writing standards and instituted writing proficiency programs. Such programs, which consist of required upper-division writing courses and/or upper-level writing proficiency examinations, imply that growth in writing ability should continue over a student's entire academic career.

All of these responses emphasize writing as a primary learning tool incorporating those cognitive skills essential for anyone to control and manipulate facts and ideas. This places a new emphasis on writing ability as a significant intellectual achievement moving far beyond "basic skills." And with this new emphasis the writing center/lab enters a new phase.

Training in basic skills is often seen as the sole raison d'etre for writing centers now functioning on college campuses. But students preparing for upper-level proficiency examinations and struggling to employ the appropriate format, vocabulary, and syntax to convey meaning in their respective disciplines will demand and require more than the sets of skill training exercises that can sometimes satisfy the freshman writers who often make up the bulk of the writing lab's clientele.

Working under a grant from Fitchburg State College I recently began a study of the writing requirements of over four hundred colleges in the United States with undergraduate enrollment of 3000 or more students. From this group I culled a list of those colleges that require students to pass a writing proficiency examination as a graduation requirement. To these schools,

seventy-six in all, I sent a questionnaire designed to determine both the form and nature of such examinations and the formal preparation and follow up procedures that are offered to students taking the examinations. One thing revealed by the survey was that the new writing proficiency requirement was creating renewed interest in the writing lab as an important campus resource.

Seventy-two percent (72%) of the schools surveyed (55) returned the questionnaires. The following data is based on that total number of responses unless otherwise specified. Sixty-two percent (62%) of the colleges reported that the writing proficiency requirement was quite recent and had been in effect for six years or less.

Forty-three percent (43%) of the colleges require an upper-division proficiency examination, - one that tests the student's writing ability at the junior level and assumes that students will have attained more than minimum competency in writing during their first two years in college. Seventeen percent (17%) of this group allow students the option of taking an upper-level writing course in lieu of the exam. Such courses are usually offered within the student's major department. They are often designated "writing emphases" courses and are designed specifically to give students additional training and experience in formal written expression of the kind necessary for research, synthesis, and analysis of data in the student's major field.

Of those schools requiring an examination, 62% ask students to complete a composition course or course sequence before attempting the examination. Forty percent (40%) do not allow students to attempt the exam until the end of their sophomore year. And while 69% stipulate only that a student must pass the writing proficiency requirement before graduation, another 24% insist

that students must pass the requirement either before enrolling in upper-division courses or before attaining junior status.

The examinations fall into three broad categories: 62% are essay only; 31% are essay plus objective test; 2% are standardized-machine scored. The remaining 5% are unspecified. That some of the tests require the writer to do more than construct a passable five-paragraph essay is evident from the fact that nearly 36% of the colleges make source materials for the essay available to students well in advance of the test.[1] The same percentage of schools (36%) reported that they offer some sort of preparation for the examination outside of regularly scheduled composition classes. Such preparation is offered either through workshops or through informal seminars.

Ninety percent (90%) of the schools with a writing proficiency requirement report that they have a writing lab. Approximately 20% of the schools require that students who fail the writing proficiency examination attend a writing lab or workshop. But only one college reports that it gives credit for the workshop program. In that case students may fulfill their proficiency requirement solely through that program. Most of the schools that require follow up work in a writing lab (75%) give an essay examination. But in no instance is the writing lab staff responsible for designing, administering or grading the writing examination.

The percentage of students who pass such examinations on their first attempt is fairly high. Half of the colleges responding reported that over 70% of their students pass on their first attempt. Another 40% reported that 60-65 percent of their students pass on the first try. Only two schools reported that fewer than 30% of their students pass immediately, and in one of those instances students are encouraged to attempt the examination early

in their academic careers in order to have their writing problems diagnosed and to allow sufficient time for them to improve their performance as writers. Repeated failure is a problem for relatively few students. Thirty percent (30%) of the colleges reported that fewer than 10% of their students had to repeat the examination more than once. Only 10% noted that more than one third of their students had to take the examination more then twice.

The evaluation criteria used for writing examinations can affect both the degree of expertise necessary for a student to pass the test and also the basic structure of the test. Seventy-five percent (75%) of the schools use a holistic scoring technique, while 7% use some type of analytic scale (i.e., Diederick's) and another 11% use either machine scoring (on objective tests) or a mixture of analytic and primary trait scoring in addition to a holistic score. No matter what the grading procedure, 56% of the schools stated that they establish specific evaluative criteria for each examination.

However the high percentage of schools reporting that they base their decision on a holistic scoring procedure suggests that the test's emphasis is placed primarily on larger considerations of content and structure. The writer's ability to organize material into a coherent and cohesive pattern with a clear focus and with adequate development of major points would be the main issue. The writer's adherence to specific rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation would be secondary.

The proposal for a new writing proficiency requirement at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) exemplifies the rationale that underlies many of the recently established writing requirements and the role of the writing lab. The report by a faculty Committee on Educational Policy (CEP)

that recommended such a requirement emphasizes that "the success of the requirement depends heavily on the acceptance of a broadly-shared curriculum-wide responsibility to emphasize the importance of writing in all subject areas and to provide opportunities for students to write."[2]

The requirement has two distinct stages. The first part features early evaluation to insure that entering students have adequate writing proficiency "and to provide information for guiding students, particularly those whose writing is not satisfactory, toward appropriate supportive resources."[3] The second part "is designed to engage upperclass students in writing in a professional context at a later stage in their undergraduate careers, and over an extended period of time."[4] The report emphasizes that the writing proficiency requirement should stress students' continuous growth in writing ability. It quotes a faculty member who states that writing "is a slow process connected much more ... with the whole of education than with 'writing courses.'"[5]

What is significant about the M.I.T. proposal is the role it sees a Writing Resource Center playing in the process. The Writing Center should not merely help poorly prepared students meet minimum competency standards. It does not envision the Writing Center as performing a function that is completely separate and distinct from that of the rest of the faculty. Instead it stresses that one function of the Center would be to "help faculty in the various disciplines deal more effectively with the writing problems of their students."[6] In addition it sees the Center as a resource available to the entire university community pointing out that ideally "other employees could also use the facility."[7]

The University of Arizona also recently instituted an upper-division Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE). In a report published in the official student newspaper, Wildcat, a faculty member explained the rationale for the examination which is part of a broader writing requirement. To meet this requirement students must pass both an upper-division Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE) and also specially designated upper-division writing-emphasis courses given by their major departments. The report suggests that the writing lab will be a significant feature of this new requirement, noting that the faculty committee that recommended the new writing proficiency requirement also requested state funding to establish a writing lab "to assist upper-division [my italics] students with their writing in a laboratory setting."[8] Students must take the WPE midway through their academic program, and if their performance is judged unsatisfactory they must upgrade their writing (through the resources that will be available to them in the writing laboratory) before they will be allowed to enroll in their department's upper-division writing-emphasis courses.

In two states (California and Georgia) a writing proficiency requirement has been mandated for the entire state college system by state regents or board of trustees. In Georgia the State Regents not only mandated the requirement but also prepare and administer the examination. While all six of the state colleges in Georgia that were surveyed do have writing labs, the writing requirement is not presented explicity as part of a general faculty effort to encourage students to work to increase their writing skill throughout their academic careers.

In California the Board of Trustees simply state that "all students entering the CSUC ... be required to demonstrate their proficiency with regard to

writing skills as a requirement for graduation," that "such demonstration of proficiency must come after a student has earned 56 semester units" and that "a lower division course ... cannot be used to fulfill the requirement."[9] Each school is free to devise its own means of implementing that policy. California State University at Northridge, for example, requires that students write a test essay as "the most direct, impartial, and reliable means of demonstrating writing skill," and lists the criteria of evaluation as "(1) a demonstration of analytic skills, (2) effective organization, (3) use of relevant concrete detail, (4) proper use of English grammer, diction, and mechanics."[10] Northridge also recommends specifically that students "go to any of the writing labs or workshops on campus for instruction in writing" as one way of preparing for the test.[11]

Several other colleges in the California state system implement the Trustee Policy for a Writing Skills Graduation Requirement through a campus-wide program of upper-level writing-emphasis courses offered independently by all major departments. The schools establish specific criteria for such courses and, as is noted in one representative college catalog, "Students may be referred to the Learning Center for additional help, but the basic responsibility for instruction in composition rests with the instructor of the class."[12]

Some colleges give the writing lab the dual responsibility both of providing basic skill training and of determining whether students have attained a level of writing proficiency adequate for graduation. One example is Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge) which lists "Proficiency in English" as a degree requirement. It states that students "whose grade in English 1002 is lower than "B" and who fail a subsequent proficiency test

"will have two semesters (beginning the next semester they are enrolled after the test is given) to demonstrate English proficiency in the English Writing Laboratory. Students who fail to demonstrate proficiency in English by the end of their second semester in the laboratory will be dropped from the college" (their italics).[13]

What can we learn from this data? It has several implications for those of us who feel that the writing center/lab should do more than simply provide basic skill training for poorly prepared freshman students. Rather the lab can serve as a resource for the entire academic community. The new emphasis on writing proficiency views writing as an important and valuable intellectual tool that the student should learn to employ with ever-increasing skill during his entire academic career. And the writing center/lab can support this view in several ways.

First, if possible, the lab should sponsor or run writing-across-the-curriculum seminars for faculty in all disciplines in order to encourage the college community as a whole to share the responsibility for students' writing performance.[14] Second, through faculty training workshops it should offer guidelines to faculty in all departments to help to identify students whose academic difficulties are directly related to their writing deficiencies.[15] Third, lab directors should be aware of the research in the relationship between cognitive development and writing ability.[16] The lab should make available those diagnostic materials and composition exercises whose value this research supports. Fourth, the lab should attempt to provide materials and workshops on those writing problems that confront writers at all levels of ability. These include, for example, overcoming writer's block, employing discovery techniques and invention heuristics, making appropriate stylistic

and rhetorical choices, designing resumes, and mastering the forms and techniques of research reports. Ideally the work of the writing center/lab should be seen as contributing to the well-being of the university as a whole.

End Notes

[1]See Appendix A for two models of examinations based on previously available source materials

[2]Michael J. Driscoll and Kenneth R. Manning, "CEP Recommends Undergraduate Writing Requirement," Tech Talk (M.I.T., Cambridge, Mass.), December 9, 1981, p.1.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid, p. 2.

[5]Ibid., p. 5

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Craig Bradford Snow, "Writing Test Designed to Help Maintain Students' Skills," Wildcat (University of Arizona), January 31, 1983.

[9]The Upper Division Writing Proficiency Requirement at California State University, Northridge, March, 1982 (pamphlet), p.1.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., p. 3.

[12]California State University, Hayward, University Catalog (1981-82), p. 101. See Appendix B for Hayward's "Criteria for Courses Meeting the Writing Skills Graduation Requirement."

[13]Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, University Catalog (1982-83), p. 109.

[14]See Draper (1982) and Lauer (1982).

[15]See Coe (1981) and Berthoff (1981).

[16]See The CEA Critic 44, 2 (January, 1982), Flower (1981), Steinglass (1982), and Stotsky (1982.

Appendix A

Two models of examinations based on previously available source materials:

Model I

"Exit Examination of Writing Proficiency" (EE)

(source: Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia)

1. At EE registration, each student will see a list of topics upon which examination questions for the scheduled testing period will be based. (Different sets of topics will be used on different examination dates.) Three topics will be general, and three will be topics selected by the student's School. (For example, an engineering student's list of six topics would include three general topics that would not relate specifically to a particular academic program, as well as three topics that the School of Engineering selects for its students.) From this list, the student will choose the two topics he prefers for his own testing. By selecting topics in advance, the student will have the opportunity to become familiar with issues relevant to the topics.

2. At the time of the scheduled examination, the examination administrator will give the student a short reading passage, along with a question relating to the passage, for each of the two selected topics. The student will review the reading selection and question for each of the topics and decide which one is preferred as a springboard for writing. The student will then write an essay that <u>answers the question selected</u>.

3. The three-hour testing period should be used to select one of the two topics, outline the composition, make a rough draft, and revise the draft for final evaluation. Only the final draft, however, will be evaluated. Although the length of the essay is not so important as the quality of the effort, the essay can be expected to be several pages long.

Model II

"Writing Proficiency Examination"

(source: University of Massachusetts, Boston,
College of Management and Professional Studies)

The exam requires you to write a short to medium-length essay addressing a question concerning two readings. First, you should read and study the advance passage, which is usually available two weeks prior to each exam. You should have a thorough understanding of this material before taking the exam so that you will be able to use it effectively in the exam session.

At the beginning of the exam, you will receive a second, shorter passage and will be asked to work with evidence from the shorter passage that is relevant to the concepts developed in the advance passage. For example, you might be asked to show how specific occurrences described in the shorter passage illustrate advance passage concepts. Whatever the specific question, a cogent response will require that you spend time analyzing the given material and that you convey the results of that analysis persuasively in writing.

Appendix B

Description of criteria for writing-emphasis courses which a student may take in lieu of a campus-wide writing competency exam:

(source: California State University, Hayward, University Catalog, 1982-83, pp. 100-101).

Criteria for Courses Meeting the Writing Skills Graduation Requirement

The following minimum criteria must be met by each course certified to meet the Writing Skills Graduation requirement.

The course must be Upper Division and, ideally, at the junior level to allow time for students with problems to correct their deficiences. The course or courses must carry a total value of at least four units of academic credit and be staffed at the C-4 level (capacity 30) or C-5 level (capacity 25). There must be regular opportunites for in-class writing. A minimum of three in-class writing assignments, exclusive of a final examination, is required. One of the these assignments must be given early in the quarter for diagnostic purposes. In addition, there must be 2,500 words or 10-12 typewritten pages of out-of-class writing required. There must be a minimum of two opportunities for revising and resubmitting written assignments. The course must include instruction both in mechanical matters and in logic and organization. Mechanical matters include, but are not limited to, spelling, punctuation, and subject-verb agreement, pronoun antecedent agreement, inflection, placement of modifiers, sentence construction, and idiomatic usage. Students may be referred to the Learning Center for additional help, but the basic responsibility for instruction in composition rests with the instructor of the class.

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